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**JOAN
BORYSENKO**
FRESH PERSPECTIVE
ON FEMININE SPIRIT

**MARIANNE
WILLIAMSON**
LIFE AFTER THE
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA • ARIZONA • NEW MEXICO • HAWAII

A Conversation with

Joan Borysenko

By Donna Strong

Dr. Joan Borysenko, Ph.D., is a wisdom woman and a leader at the forefront of the shift to a unified mind/body paradigm of healing. A cofounder and former director of the Mind/Body Clinic at Harvard Medical School, Joan is now applying her remarkable ability to synthesize information and bridge disciplines as a lecturer and workshop facilitator. With inspiration and insight, she is bringing her powerful personal vision to expand the horizon on holistic healing and growth.

Awareness: Joan, your work brings such a fresh perspective about the feminine spirit and the gifts we offer of interdependence and interrelatedness. It is a pleasure to have this time with you!

To begin: With two major roles; one in the professional world as an income earner, and another as a nurturer in the home, so many women talk about feeling stressed and depleted. What would you say to our readers about the huge dilemma that women face of giving and nurturing others without a balance of self-care to restore themselves?

Joan: It is a very rich question. Women love to nurture because we have enormously empathetic hearts. We nurture because we see the needs of other people, we want to be there for them. New research by Shelley Taylor at UCLA shows that biologically we are cut out to nurture. In her book “The Tending Instinct,” she offers some great new information. When we tend to others or we spend time with friends, we release a hormone called oxytocin. This is the same hormone that we release during labor and during milk ‘let down,’ when the first milk flows to feed a baby.

The book presents research that reflects some gender differences. When men are stressed they have a ‘fight or flight’ response, whereas when women are stressed, they have this basic response as well, but women reduce their stress by ‘tending and befriending.’ I find this interesting in terms of your question, because I used to come home from work when my kids were little, and truly the more stressful my day, the more I would spend time nurturing. It appears contrary, because it seems like you would need more time for yourself. Indeed it is true of men, who are stressed after a long day of work. Other research at UCLA by a colleague of Shelley Taylor’s, Clinical Psychology Professor, Rena Repetti, showed that after a stressful work day, women are actually more affectionate with their children, because it releases oxytocin. Oxytocin makes women feel peaceful, calm and centered! Isn’t that interesting?

Awareness: That’s positive and provocative information!

Joan: There’s a thought out there; we nurture and we nurture and we nurture, until we finally burn ourselves out, and in part that’s true. Yet I was so glad to find that when we nurture our animals and children, we are releasing oxytocin and really filling our own well.

For me, my kids are grown up, but I find when I’m feeling really strung-out, I like to bathe my dogs. I always wondered about that. I’d think, Joan, you’re so strung out, why is it that you want to bathe and brush your dogs? Finally I realized it was because it calms me down. I think it’s interesting for women who are stressed and busy, to make a distinction between what kind of busy tasks nurture them and what depletes them further. I know for example that returning a bunch of e-mail when I’ve already been running all day,

may have to wait. Yet being with a pet or friends, or being in nature are all centering in a way that meditation or exercise, or any other fine self-care activity is.

Awareness: I read about oxytocin many years ago and was very impressed with its capacity as a hormone.

Joan: Its capacity is incredible. I remember giving birth to my boys. Giving birth is physically like an endurance contest, and it is scary... and yet you give birth and what you feel is an encompassing experience of cosmic oneness! A sense of such peace and such rightness with the world and interconnectedness with everything. While we live in physical bodies, oxytocin mediates through the birth process and provides a sensory link with these amazing feelings.

Awareness: I was very touched by the example you use in your book, “A Woman’s Book of Life,” describing its ability to facilitate a sense of love at first sight with a newborn, to give a new mother the powerful fuel that is the energy of love. You describe it most aptly as “a biological gift that ease{s} the stress of the sleepless nights, fatigue, and inherent frustrations of caring for a newborn.”

This is a prime example of the information you present so masterfully; illuminating the deeper purpose of our biology and offering understanding of our real design as the feminine. We are designed to function with oxytocin as a hormonal ally, a positive biochemical impulse that extends a woman’s capacity to care for others and affirm life.

Joan: The mind and the body and spirit are very integrated. Going back to address your original question, women tend to overdo, and in part, it may be due to the fact that we have the oxytocin to fall back on. A lot of the nurturing does feel wonderful. Sometimes, what happens is we are already so depleted, but don’t recognize it, because it is masked by the response from the oxytocin, the good feelings. So when we crash, we can crash very hard.

I do a lot of retreats for women and the biggest complaint women have is feeling absolutely overwhelmed. It is increasing with the speed of everything. One example is the way e-mail works, people actually think you’ll get back to them within an hour. I personally have a message on my telephone — which pretty much says, ‘give up all hope — it could be months or forever before I can get back to you because I just can’t do everything.’

Awareness: That’s a great point. One of the antidotes to overwhelm is to have some boundaries and to be able to take life’s agenda in chunks that are digestible, rather than just continuing to mound things up and increase the load of overwhelm.

Joan: Yes, once in a while I get a message from someone who is a bit peeved, but I get a lot more messages that acknowledge; ‘Wow, you really know how to take care of yourself.’ It is one of those things where our greatest strength as a woman can also be a real weakness.

Awareness: That is so true. Speaking of taking care of yourself — I would have loved to have had this information to guide me when I was much younger. The work you have done is such a classic primer for a woman’s life, illuminating the themes and the wisdom inherent in each phase, integrating biology with our spiritual growth opportunities.

Joan: It would be great for all of us to have this information earlier in life. One of the biggest themes in the book is the development of intuition across the life cycle of women; what it is to learn to really listen to yourself and pay attention. This is not only a biological thing, but sometimes because we are so empathetic and care so much about the needs of others, we can be too easily swayed. We don’t take the time to listen to ourselves, so we lose our own point of view.

As a teenager, I wish that someone had explained three things to me. The first would have been about honoring my own knowing, my own intuition. I would have been fascinated to say, 'oh, you mean my intuition might change with my menstrual period?' What people call PMS might actually be the voice of my intuition saying, pay attention, pay attention. The things that you are complaining about aren't groundless complaints, they really need to be looked at, and put right in your world. I would have been fascinated to think, this is the time of the month when I'm most connected to my inner self, so I should watch my dreams. That would have been a great understanding.

The second would have been about using my own voice and to hold my center in regard to other people's opinions. It's related to intuition, but I see it as important in its own right. The third piece of information I would have loved to know when I was young is more understanding about the tension between what we do for others in response to empathy, and learning to pay attention to our own needs for attention. Had somebody explained to me that this tension would help me grow as a woman, it would have been a tremendous boost.

I would have loved to have information that would have helped me to hear the warning signs of burnout, or of selling out; not paying attention to what is true. I would have wanted to know what it was like to give in a healthy way and what are healthy boundaries. Those are the kinds of things that go through the whole life cycle of women. In seventh or eighth grade I remember mulling these things over.

Awareness: You are known for your work with stress. What kind of connection do you find between chronic stress or distress, and women not being able to be authentic?

Joan: Oh, that's a fabulously interesting question. When I look at stress, I have to look at coping. Stress can either act as a catalyst to become more authentic, or if you're the sort of person who is a regressive copier, or a denier, for instance, then it drives you further from yourself. The effect of stress is a function of two things; your innate coping style and your degree of self-awareness. For instance, someone who is pessimistic is likely to seek friends to support them in whining about how awful things are. That's really where I was up until my thirties. Then I began to say there must be a better way of doing this and began to ask, 'What does a stress-hardy person do?'

This questioning led me to research done by Suzanne Kobasa, who identifies a stress-hardy person as one who responds to a stressful event with the three c's. First, they see it as a challenge rather than a threat. They have a commitment to something greater, for example, personal growth. The third 'c' is control. Control means you exert effort where you can have an impact. So the first thing I did was to develop more self-awareness. If I make a true inquiry here, what does my body tell me? The body doesn't lie, it tells the truth. As long as you are willing to work with stress and use it as a tool for inquiry and witness, it delivers you to a much greater sense of authenticity.

Awareness: On a related issue, you write about the plasticity of our system and its ability to change. When we arrive at a new self-awareness, it suggests a physical component as to how the body is wired allowing for change.

Joan: Yes, thank goodness, we can make new neural pathways. As we change our thoughts our mental wiring undergoes changes as well. Using myself as an example, I may still think pessimistically, but now I take more station breaks for the 'opposing point of view.' Little by little, I am growing different synapses, different connections in my brain. Some of the work I cited in the book illustrates that the brain continues to be remodeled throughout our whole lifetime. As women, we continue to grow in right brain function, so that our intuitive capacity, our capacity for empathy, and the ability to grasp the whole, continues as we grow older.

Awareness: This is news to celebrate.

Joan: Yes, this is great. It is paralleled by an increase in our storytelling ability which is really wonderful because it's an expanded ability with pattern recognition. In our brain there is an increased capacity in recognizing pattern and meaning in life. As we get older we're looking for what the events in our life mean. How can I hold all these different facts and stories from my life and that of other people? It's great that we continue to grow this way in our brains, as well as our minds and hearts.

Awareness: Continuing on, you have written about how the right brain is the seat of transcendental experiences and that it can assist in healing through being open to guidance, such as in dreams.

Joan: On this subject I would recommend a marvelous book by a brilliant colleague and friend, Mona Lisa Schultz, called "Awakening Intuition." An M.D. psychiatrist, a Ph.D. neuroscientist, and a medical intuitive, she knows things we can't know with our usual five senses. Her sixth sense is extremely well developed. Mona's book is one that every woman should read on the subject of intuition because it will help us to recognize that we're all wired differently.

For example, my intuition works so well through dreams, while for other women it works in different ways of 'knowing'—through body sensations, and sudden knowings about things. As women, we are likely to say, 'she's really intuitive, she's good at that, but I don't have any intuition. It's wonderful to recognize that each one of us does have it, and that it can be developed with training. Our biggest task is to figure out what channel it comes in on and tune into that channel.

Awareness: One of the key aspects you address about women is our focus on interrelatedness. I have used one of your gems a great deal in my own relationship and it has become one of those 'primer' items that others should know about to make life much more understandable: "Couples who are in rapport with each other actually entrain one another's autonomic nervous systems."

Joan: It's true. Women are so empathetic, we are like psychic sponges and often we are not feeling our own feelings, we are feeling someone else's. We pick up feelings of people all around us. In a committed relationship with someone, where there is close proximity and physical touch, often when one person gets very peaceful, then the other person entrains to this state and they are both peaceful. On the other hand, if one person becomes highly stressed and worked up, this can then be transferred as well.

You know from doing bodywork the significance of healing presence. When you are in your center, and you are peaceful and calm, then regardless of what you are doing with a client as a method, they're going to find healing from it, because you're entraining them to the sense of presence. The rest is a bonus. A lot of healing in the moment is occurring through that entrainment process.

So in a personal relationship, it's a good thing first to notice when someone gets stirred up and stressed. In the moment then, at least one of the pair can make a conscious choice to adapt more constructively. Then, just as in a session, you can bring healing presence and ask, what do we need to look at, what do we need to process, why is one of us stressed?

Awareness: I've had the experience of healing presence and it is amazing when we have such a meeting in the moment.

In another area, you comment upon our ability as women to perceive from the perspective of interdependence and interrelatedness as an elevated form of logical thinking. In some sectors women have been portrayed as being overly emotional and not rational enough, so this is an interesting way to re-frame this capacity.

Joan: Much of what we are concerned with isn't seen in the proper context. Think about the fact that if we don't believe that a healthy natural environment is a given in life, then if we kill off the very nature that

supports the fabric of life, what will we have for our children? We need lawmakers who are more concerned with the environment and its ability to sustain life. If we ruin our environment there is nothing left. As women, we perceive the web of interdependence, and in general are more likely to say, ‘wait a minute, what’s going to happen if we dirty this water...’ We are one small world, I find it to be highly logical to consider how we can allocate resources in a way that will continue to benefit and nourish us all.

Awareness: We’ve talked about key facets of life as a woman, in which we are challenged to become more authentic — through the stress of personal growth challenges, in the mother and child bond, in sexual and love relationships, with friends, and in connection to the planet. What would you add in closing?

Joan: In closing I would offer this to your readers: Life is not easy, but it is still beautiful. There is so much on every level to be grateful for. By creating an appreciation of growth, celebration and gratitude in our lives, we cultivate more harmony.

Awareness: As women, we cultivate more harmony in life through our focus on interrelatedness and maintaining positive connections with fellow humans and other sentient forms of life.

May we celebrate these gifts!

For further information about Joan’s schedule, books and tapes or newsletter, please visit her website: www.joanborysenko.com

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Return to the [January/February](#) Index page